DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 282 799 SO 018 114

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TITLE A Look at Japanese Education Today. Research in Brief.
INSTITUTION Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Mar 87
NOTE 4p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Information Analyses (070)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cross Cultural Studies; *Cultural Differences; Cultural Traits; *Educational Attitudes; *Educational Philosophy; *Educational Practices; Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; Ethical Instruction; Ethnicity; Foreign Countries; *Foreign Culture
IDENTIFIERS *Japan

ABSTRACT

The Japanese educational system is highly effective and is frequently pointed to as a potential model for reform of U.S. education. Although meaningful comparisons are difficult to make because the cultures are so different, educators in the United States can borrow and adopt many of the practices that make Japanese schools outstanding. According to federal researchers who recently examined Japan's schools in a two-year study, Japan's culture and family life have a major impact on the success of its educational system. While compulsory education in Japan is the same length as that in most states of the United States (nine years), 94% of Japanese students complete twelfth grade. On a cumulative basis, Japanese students spend the equivalent of one U.S. school year longer (180 more days) in school than U.S. students by the time they graduate from high school. Japanese children are automatically promoted to the next grade in the belief that all normal children can learn if they are self-disciplined, exert the effort, and persevere. Teachers present the same lesson in the same way to all children in the class; slow learners may attend privately run remedial schools called jikus. Most comparisons of the two systems cite mathematics as an area in which United States students fall short. Moral education also plays a fundamental role in Japan and is taught through the ninth grade. Japanese culture continues its influence through high school, and although Japanese adolescents do rebel, typical rebellions are mild by Western standards. (BZ)

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ED282799

A LOOK AT JAPANESE EDUCATION TODAY
Research in Brief

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SO018114

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Research in Brief

Chester E. Finn, Jr., Assistant Secretary

William J. Bennett, Secretary

A Look at Japanese Education Today

Japanese education does many things exceptionally well. Although meaningful comparisons are difficult to make because the cultures are so different, Americans can borrow and adapt many of the practices that make Japanese schools so good.

Japan's culture and family life have a major impact on the success of its educational system, according to Federal researchers who recently examined Japan's schools. Their two-year study, *Japanese Education Today*, resulted from an agreement between President Reagan and Prime Minister Nakasone to have each nation study the other's schools. The Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) conducted the U.S. study.

The researchers found that Japanese society demands–and gets–a lot from its schools. Teachers are expected to teach moral values, character, and good habits, such as neatness, punctuality, and respect, as well as the three R's.

Likewise, intense parental involvement is expected. Mothers are especially close to their children and responsible for their early socialization and education. They take this responsibility seriously because Japanese society judges a woman's maternal success largely on how well her children do in school.

Schools let parents know what they expect of them. They frequently set boundaries for children's movements within a neighborhood or recommend curfews. PTA newsletters sometimes suggest to parents when their children should get up and go to bed as well as the hours they should study and play during vacations.

Japanese families instill the importance of education in their children early. They celebrate entrance into first grade much more than high school graduation. The first grader receives numerous gifts of school supplies, often including a personal desk, chair, and leather backpack (required by Japanese schools) costing up to $150.

While compulsory education in Japan is the same length as that in most American States–9 years–94 percent of Japanese students complete 12th grade. Japanese students must formally apply and pass tough entrance examinations to get into high school. Only the best students get into public high schools; the others enroll in private ones. Both schools charge tuition. An average family spends about 5 percent of its gross income on a child's public high school education; private schools cost twice as much.

The Japanese school year usually is reported to be 240 days. This figure is somewhat misleading. Japan requires a minimum of 210 days of instruction, including a half day on Saturdays. Local school boards, which can add more time, usually require 240 days. This allows 30 "extra" days for activities such as field trips, cultural festivals, and graduation ceremonies. The Japanese school year equals about 195 days of classroom instruction. America's average school year is 180 days including time for activities for which the Japanese add extra days.

On a cumulative basis, Japanese students spend 180 more days in school than American students–or the equivalent of one American school year longer–by the time they graduate from high school.

Japanese children are automatically promoted to the next grade, regardless of academic achievement. The Japanese believe that all normal children can learn if they are self-disciplined, exert the effort, and persevere. Students are not grouped according to ability nor is instruction usually adapted to meet an individual child's need. Teachers present the same lesson in the same way to all children in the class.

Japanese youngsters must absorb large quantities of new material and move quickly from one concept to the next. Most children manage to keep pace, but some fall behind. A recent study of reading achievement among first- and fifth-grade children in one large Japanese city showed that most children enter first grade well prepared in reading. However, by the fifth grade, many fall seriously behind.

Although some teachers do help slow learners outside of class, the burden of remedial education falls directly on the family, which hires a tutor or enrolls the child in a "juku," the Japanese term for privately run remedial and enrichment schools. Children attend juku after school and on weekends. Juku provide a socially acceptable way for parents to fulfill their educational responsibilities to their children. Few parents deny their offspring the chance to attend juku; some even feel they would be derelict in their duties if they did not send their children to juku.

Japanese children study many of the same subjects American youngsters do: social studies, reading, and grammar. However, most comparisons of the two systems cite mathematics as an area in which American students fall short.

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IS 87-107 RIB

The time spent on arithmetic in elementary school in Japan is only a bit more than that allocated in this country; however, Japanese children are introduced to many math concepts much earlier than American youngsters. Japanese children spend more time studying arithmetic through better use of classroom time, homework, and juku.

Moral education also plays a fundamental role in Japan and is taught through ninth grade. It includes learning the importance of thoughtfulness, manners, respect for public property, freedom, justice, fairness, rights, trust, and self-control.

Japanese culture continues its influence through high school. Students are not legally allowed to drive until they are 18. Schools and parents discourage part-time jobs because they distract students from study and are thought to expose them to bad influences. Schools also impose after-school regulations, including curfews and dress codes, and prohibit visits to game parlors, coffee shops, or other "undesirable" neighborhood attractions.

Japanese adolescents do rebel. Typical rebellions might be small but significant alterations in school uniforms or hair style regulations. Girls might lengthen their skirts or have their hair dyed brown or set in a permanent wave; rebellious boys widen the legs of their school uniforms.

Smoking cigarettes is considered a serious form of delinquency among high school students. When caught, they receive a police warning. Repeated offenses are grounds for expulsion. There is little adolescent drinking; marijuana and hard drugs are virtually unavailable.

The report also examines Japan's colleges and universities, which many consider the weakest part of the entire education system. While Japan is noted for its high quality elementary and secondary teaching, the quality of postsecondary teaching is uneven. Very few college graduates—4 percent—pursue a master's or doctor's degree.

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Japanese Education Today, is available for $4.75 from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402. When ordering please include the stock number, S/N 065-000-00275-2.

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March 1987

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